

LIGHTS, CAMERA, TOUCHDOWN

By Bob Carroll

You probably know that Jim Thorpe had small parts in many movies in the 1930s and 40s. Would you believe 45? At least that's what it says on one of those movie websites. His first was as an uncredited extra in *Touchdown* with Richard Arlen in 1931. Most of his movies (to stretch a possessive) were the kind of forgettable westerns that cost you points on your resume. Worse, Ol' Jim was usually just a face in the crowd, posse, or war party.

However, a couple of the films he was in do occasionally show up on TV and maybe they're available on video. Like he was a native dancer (not the horse) in *King Kong*. His big year was 1935 when he showed up in at least ten films. One of them was *Captain Blood* with Errol Flynn, and another was *Alibi Ike* with Joe E. Brown.

In *They Died with Their Boots On* (1941), the Errol Flynn whitewash of General Custer, Thorpe appears but is uncredited. He was billed as "Passenger" in *The Road to Utopia* with Bob Hope and Bing Crosby. In *White Heat* (1949), the Jimmy Cagney portrait of a sadistic killer with the famous line "Top of the world, Ma!" Thorpe is in one of the prison scenes and is listed as "Big Inmate."

His last appearance as an actor came in 1950 in *Wagonmaster*, a John Ford western.

Better known is the movie career of Red Grange which was much shorter. In 1926, he starred as "Red Wade" in *One Minute to Play*, a football epic that actually got pretty good reviews. A year later, he played "Red Walden," a race driver, in *A Racing Romeo*. In 1931, he went back to what he knew best in *The Galloping Ghost*. His character, who saved the Big Game from crooked gamblers, was given the unusual name of "Red Grange."

Red's only other Hollywood turns seem to have been in *Pro Football* in 1934, a demonstration film in which the Chicago Bears ran plays, and in some archive footage used in Woody Allen's *Zelig* in 1983.

Sammy Baugh's resume is even shorter. In 1941 he played the lead, "Ranger Tom King, Jr.," in a serial called *King of the Texas Rangers*. According to one reviewer, this was "the best of all serials." Perhaps, but Sammy didn't go before the cameras again until 1948 when he was one of a mob of NFL players in the never-to-be-forgotten epic, *Triple Threat*. This was one of those paste-ups they used to do where a cast of B-picture actors pretend to work through an inane plot so the star athletes can be brought on camera. In addition to Baugh, the movie luxuriated in the stardom of Paul Christman, Johnny Clement, 'Boley' Dancewicz, Bill Dudley, Paul Governali, 'Indian' Jack Jacobs,

Sid Luckman, Charles Trippi, Steve Van Buren, and Bob Waterfield. Harry Wismer and Tom Harmon played announcers. So far as we know, there were no Oscar nominations.

Of all the football players-turned-actors, one of the best was Elroy Hirsch. In 1953, he surprised a lot of people with his fine performance in *Crazylegs*, a biographical film. And for those who scoffed that playing himself was hardly a stretch, he came through with yet another fine job in 1955's *Unchained*, playing an ex-con. The film is still worth watching, but it is best known for its haunting theme, "Unchained Melody."

Possibly Hirsch's most interesting film was 1957's *Zero Hour*. He played a pilot in one of the first airplane-at-risk flicks. The film itself isn't bad, but it's hard to watch and take it seriously because it was used as the model for the wildly funny *Airplane!* The hero (Dana Andrews) is named Stryker, many plot twists are similar, and even lines are the same like "I picked the wrong weekend to quit smoking."

The list of footballers who tried the movie scene is almost endless and certainly too long to give here. Suffice to say there are 50 actor-footballers for each football movie worth seeing. Most of the actors are backs or receivers. Perhaps that's why this writer has special affections for linemen like Merlin Olsen and Alex Karras and linebacker Mike Henry.

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